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Report: Hill Web sites unresponsive on Sept. 11

Most offices do not have remote access to Web servers

BY [Judi Hasson](#)
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Congress spent millions of dollars developing Web sites for lawmakers and committees, but on Sept. 11, 2001 — the day some people say it really counted — most of the sites failed to deliver anything close to a warning, alert or information on where to get help.

Only a handful of sites posted any information at all about the terrorist attacks or their aftermath. And when anthrax shut down congressional office buildings a few weeks later, there was little information on the sites about that, either.

A new study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project called "One Year Later: September 11 and the Internet," found that congressional Web sites were unresponsive to the worst terrorist attacks in U.S. history.

"During the anthrax attacks, the House of Representatives' site had a small notice containing information about the building's safety and provided links to the Centers for Disease Control [and Prevention] and the Postal Service, but this was the only indication that the site's producers had updated it since Sept. 11," the report said.

Two congressional committees heavily involved in the aftermath of the attacks — the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Intelligence Committee — had little or no information about the attacks on their sites, according to the report.

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Only a few congressional sites provided information, including that of Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.), who returned to his office at 5 p.m. Sept. 11 with his staff and became the first member of Congress to post information about the attacks.

Brad Fitch, deputy director of the Congressional Management Foundation, said that Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), who is a doctor, also used his site to provide some of the best information about anthrax.

"He became the source for scared staffers who wanted to find out how to deal with it," Fitch said.

The failure to respond quickly to the tragic events occurred, in large part, because every congressional Web site is its own entity. And many offices had not established a way to dial into their servers or remotely update their sites, according to Kathy Goldschmidt, director of technology services for the Congressional Management Foundation.

"When lawmakers were out of their offices, they couldn't update their Web sites, especially during the anthrax attacks," Goldschmidt said. "There was no way to communicate via the Web for most of them."

Steven Schneider, co-director of WebArchivist.org and an author of the study, said many members added a link to their sites after Sept. 11 directing the public to another site.

Although the role of congressional Web sites is still evolving, the role of government Web sites in general has forever changed because of the terrorist attacks, he said.

"If you are going to have a Web site out there, you are going to need to respond when necessary," Schneider said. "Government agencies have learned that their emergency response component must include a Web site."

But members of Congress do not see their Web sites as a news source, according to Darrell West, a political science professor at Brown University who conducts an annual survey of federal Web sites.

"It's really every person for themselves in the world of congressional Web sites," West said. "Each office controls its own site, so you have a wide variability in how much information they contain."

And in the computer world, it's always good to have a backup, he added. "There should be alternative ways to update a Web site other than being in a building," he said. "This is an electronic era.... I can update my Web site from Europe. It's not technologically difficult."

Congress is taking a hard look at how to ensure the continuity of its operations should another catastrophe occur. Also, the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution have launched the Continuity of Government Commission, which will hold its first hearing Sept. 23 to investigate how to keep the entire government functioning

after an attack.

Congress has made plans for evacuations and alternative meeting places, and gas masks have been issued to members since last Sept. 11, but there is no long-term plan to deal with a potentially lethal situation, according to John Fortier, executive director of the commission.

"There is a way that technology can help us overcome some of these issues," Fortier said. "We are concerned that in an emergency situation...where members couldn't come together...that some sort of mechanism for remote communications and remote voting might be warranted."

Since last year's attacks, some congressional offices have established remote access to their Web sites and other means of communicating in an emergency, according to Goldschmidt.

"They are improving their infrastructures to make it easier for offices to update and improve their Web sites, to improve their communications electronically," she said. "They've done a lot in the last year."